# Principal mentoring in one education district in the Western Cape: A case study

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The aim with this study was to investigate mentoring as a professional developmental strategy for principals and to establish whether there was a need for a formal mentoring programme for principals and circuit managers. An interpretive, qualitative case study approach was adopted, with 13 participants being selected for interview via purposive sampling. Data were generated from semi-structured interviews. The findings reveal that the professional developmental strategies to which principals are exposed are not sustainable. The findings also show that principals were exposed to informal mentoring practices but were never part of a formal mentoring programme, and that there was a need for such a programme. We, therefore, recommend that a mentoring programme for principals be developed and phased in accordingly, namely the connection between the mentee and the mentor, relationship building and implementation, assessment (reflection), and separation of the mentee and mentor from the mentoring relationship.

**Keywords:** andragogy; constructivism; mentoring; mentoring programme; mentoring relationships; situated learning

## Introduction and Background

With this study we investigated the critical issue of mentoring as a professional development strategy for principals in South Africa. Globally, mentoring as a practice to prepare and train principals for the role of principalship is common practice (Bickmore & Davenport, 2019; Huffman, 2017; Southern Regional Education Board [SREB], 2007) but at the time of this study, little research could be found on work done in South Africa in terms of mentoring of school principals. The primary goal of principalship is to provide leadership and management by creating an environment that promotes quality teaching and learning in order to improve learner performance (Department of Basic Education [DBE], Republic of South Africa [RSA], 2014). To ensure the quality of a school's performance, principals must understand leadership as a process, develop human relations skills, and promote collaborative action (Prinsloo, 2016; Steyn, 2009). According to Botha (2004), the principal's role is ultimately a balance of instructional leadership with management, as school leadership deals with areas such as supervising the curriculum, improving the school's instructional programme, working with staff to identify the school's vision and mission, and building a close relationship with the community.

Strike and Nickelsen (2011) identify additional characteristics of educational leadership that include goal setting, collaboration and collaborative initiatives, encouragement, tuning in, correspondence, progression, explanation, implementation of policy, execution of a common goal, facing obstacles, and inspiring those they lead. Strike and Nickelsen (2011) also distinguish leadership from management. A manager is a decision-maker who plans, monitors, guides, and fosters a positive environment, imparts, mentors, and gathers resolve (Bush & Middlewood, 2005; Clarke, 2007; Strike & Nickelsen, 2011).

Mestry (2017) adds that management also involves aspects like budget supervision, maintaining school buildings and grounds, and adhering to educational policies and acts. Despite all of these requirements, the majority of active principals lack fundamental training in leadership and management both before and after becoming principals (Mestry, 2017). According to Mathibe (2007), many educational programmes fail to fulfil their mandates because of ineffective management and leadership. Mestry (2017) claims that principals struggle to deal with change, for example, in part because they are unprepared for their leadership roles. It is also possible that they lack the knowledge, experience, and attitudes required to lead and manage schools effectively and efficiently. Both Mestry and Mathibe believe that professional development for principals is critical to the functionality of schools.

When asked to identify a vital component of their preparation, principals pointed to other school leaders as their primary source of support in becoming school leaders themselves, and they confirmed that these mentoring relationships served them through the years, not just initially (Daniels, 2021). Principals in this study reported that they received no formal preparation before assuming the role of principal. They were subsequently exposed to various forms of professional development and training that did not specifically address their needs and help them negotiate a convoluted education system, which is consistent with the views of Msila (2012) and Van Louw and Waghid (2008). This absence of preparation can be mitigated by mentoring, which provides novice principals with a long-term relationship in which they work with an individual, an experienced mentor, who helps them to evolve their own approach to educational leadership.

Mestry (2017) asserts that education authorities should constantly develop and support principals for them to lead schools effectively. With this study we thus investigated the implementation of principal mentoring as a

professional development strategy, assessing its importance in informing policy and practice in organisational effectiveness. While principals in South Africa face many obstacles and tend to learn on the job by trial and error (Msila, 2012), according to the SREB (2007), mentoring can greatly increase the efficiency of this process. Mentoring is a developmental partnership through which an experienced person shares knowledge, skills, information and perspectives to foster the personal and professional growth of someone less experienced (Barnett, 2013; Hudson, 2012; Jones & Larwin, 2015; Pask & Joy, 2007; Robinson, 2010; Starr, 2016; Strike & Nickelsen, 2011). The findings of this study reveal that, unfortunately, the mentoring received by participants was *ad hoc* and not systematically implemented. Part of the reason for this is that the district in which the study was conducted lacks the capacity to institutionalise a formal mentoring framework for principals.

The purpose of this study was, therefore, to establish whether there was indeed a need for a formal mentoring framework for principals in one of the Western Cape Education Department's districts. The article emanates from a doctoral thesis (Daniels, 2021) in which the underlying principles of principal mentoring were explored to formulate a framework for the express purpose of mentoring principals.

The research problem explored in this study was: What are the perceptions and experiences of principals regarding the need for and development of a formal mentoring framework?

## Literature Review
### *Principals' responsibilities envisaged by the Department of Basic Education*
International research in the early 2000s on the work of school principals revealed that the job was becoming increasingly difficult, tedious, and unappealing to prospective candidates (Glanz, 2006; Martin, Wright, Danzig, Flanary & Brown, 2005; Thomson & Blackmore, 2006). Local researchers also suggest that principals in South African schools experience the same difficulties and are in dire need of professional development to improve their knowledge and skills to enable them to lead and manage their schools efficiently (Botha, 2004; Mathibe, 2007; Mestry, 2017; Msila, 2012; Steyn, 2009; Van Deventer & Kruger, 2003). To understand the difficulties that they face and the need for professional development, it is critical to understand principals' praxes, perspectives, and the realities of their context and environment. The roles and responsibilities of principals as described in Articles 16(1), 16(2) and 16(3) of the South African Schools Act (SASA) (1996) (RSA, 1996) can be summarised as: acting as the representative of the head of the education department, being the professional manager of the school and being a member of the school governing body (SGB). The

management of schools comprises curriculum support, human resource and administrative management, oversight of financial procedures, implementation of legislation and regulations, maintenance of infrastructure, and ensuring the safety and security of learners and staff in and around the school (RSA, 1996).

Acknowledging the restricted definitions of the roles and responsibilities of principals that are also contained in both the Personnel Administrative Measures (PAM) and the appraisal system, the DBE, RSA (2015) developed the Policy on the South African Standard for Principalship, which aims to fully define the position of school principals and the main aspects of the professionalism, image, and competencies needed (DBE, RSA, 2016). According to the Standard for Principalship, the DBE believes that it is critical to develop a clear and agreed-upon definition of what the South African education system requires of those who are or aspire to be entrusted with the leadership and management of schools. According to the PAM, principals are responsible for the competent management of schools and providing support to the SGB (DBE, RSA, 2016:C-64–C-65). The principal is described by the SASA (RSA, 1996) as an educator who is appointed as the school's manager. According to the SASA, the principal is the school's primary administrator and is responsible for developing and implementing policies, services, curriculum events, and budgets in a way that facilitates each learner's educational growth as well as the professional development of each staff member. The DBE recognises the following differentiated developmental needs for professionalising principals and the advancement of their position (DBE, RSA, 2016) with the help of the provincial education departments (PEDs):
- principals' skills and competencies are improved;
- improvement of the procedures for recruiting and selecting principals;
- principals are inducted and mentored; and
- principals are professionally prepared.

### *Orientation to the concept of mentoring*
A mentor, in its broadest sense, is a "parent" figure who guides and instructs a younger person (Pask & Joy, 2007:7). Pask and Joy (2007:7) suggest that some people may find it helpful to refer to Greek mythology and the story of Ulysses and his son, Telemachus. The term "mentor" comes from Homer's epic, the Odyssey, which was written around 700 BC. Mentor was Odysseus' friend and servant who was tasked with teaching, directing, and instructing Odysseus' son, Telemachus, in his story. Much has been written about mentoring and its potential for improving workplace learning and growing an organisation's human capital since 700 BC, especially in the last 30 years or so of the last century (i.e., 1970–2000) (Pask & Joy, 2007:8).

It is doubtful that Homer, the author of the mentor myth, could have predicted the mentor concept's widespread popularity in academic and mainstream literature (Ehrich, Hansford & Tennent, 2001). He also would not have predicted the formalisation of mentoring arrangements (i.e., through formal mentoring programmes) in several workplace environments, including government departments, colleges, hospitals, schools, and businesses of all sizes (Ehrich et al., 2001). Pask and Joy (2007) conclude that a mentor is a person who helps others think things through; however, researchers define mentoring differently (see, for instance, definitions by Hudson, 2012; Starr, 2016; Whiston & Sexton, 1998). It is noteworthy that the story of Odysseus is significant in identifying the main features of mentoring and, therefore, mentoring relationships. Firstly, the story of Odysseus identifies the benefits of mentoring, secondly, the combination of experience, wisdom and sensitivity of the mentor, and thirdly, the values and aspirations of the mentee (Pask & Joy, 2007).

*Defining the concept of mentoring*
Hudson (2012) describes mentoring as the support, assistance, advocacy, or guidance given by one person to another in order to achieve an objective over a period. It also constitutes a process that enables leaders to initiate productive relationships, create an identity and identify concerns, determine effective responses to resistance and empower others through collaborative learning (Hudson, 2012). Starr (2016) defines mentoring as a distinct relationship where one person (the mentor) supports the learning, development and progress of another person (the mentee). For the purposes of this study, mentoring is defined as an organised, integrated process in which the mentee principal and the principal mentor collaborate in a constructive, learning-centred partnership with the goal of increasing leadership ability, professional growth, and support. The process is not unidirectional and acknowledges the mentee's agency (Hudson, 2012; Jones & Larwin, 2015; Pask & Joy, 2007; Starr, 2016). It can be deduced that a mentor is more than an adviser as he or she provides the mentee with wisdom, technical knowledge, assistance, support, empathy and respect throughout the mentee's career – and often even beyond.

Van Louw and Waghid (2008) posit that mentorship is increasingly being regarded as a professional development tool for improving school principals' competence levels. This is evidenced by the introduction of the Advanced Certificate: Education Leadership and Management, which aims to improve school principals' leadership and management skills (Van Louw & Waghid, 2008). The SREB (2007) claims that mentoring is increasingly seen as an effective way of helping people develop in their professional careers. They also argue that effective principals are not born, they are mentored. We posit that mentoring as a professional development strategy is more sustainable than *ad hoc* development programmes that provide limited benefits.

Theoretical Framework
The theoretical underpinning of this study derived from Lave and Wenger's work (1991) regarding situated learning and communities of practice, enhanced by the work of the likes of Clancey (1995), Rankin (2015) and Smith (1999). Situated learning developed in the 1990s and was first proposed by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger as a model of learning in a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rankin, 2015; see also Clancey, 1995; Smith, 1999). The theory of situated learning is based on Bandura's (1977) social learning theory (characterised by modelling) and Vygotsky's (1962) constructivism (characterised by scaffolding and fading), while Dewey (1961), Knowles (1984) and Kolb (1984) helped to theorise andragogy.

Situated learning is characterised by problem-based learning, experiential learning and the principles of adult education or andragogy (Anderson, Reder & Simon, 1996). Learning, according to Lave and Wenger (1991), is a social mechanism in which information is co-constructed. Lave and Wegner postulate that learning takes place in a specific setting and is rooted in a specific social and physical environment.

Conceptual Framework
The conceptual framework for this study was developed to answer the research question on whether the need for and development of a formal mentoring framework existed. The principal as learner was central in the study, and adult learning and constructivism as theories were taken in consideration to investigate the different learning styles of adults. Figure 1 illustrates how the seven andragogic assumptions and principles – self-directed learning, individual differences, desire to learn and readiness to learn – fit into a mentoring framework for principals. Figure 1 also considers the elements of situated learning as distinguished by Clancey (1995), Collins and Kapur (2014), Lave and Wenger (1991), Rankin (2015) and Smith (1999), namely content, context, community and participation.

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As stated above, the practice of situated learning arose from research done in the 1980s and 1990s (Collins & Kapur, 2014). We are of the opinion that there are three foundational studies that support situated learning. According to Collins and Kapur (2014), situated learning is the practice of learning that connects the task the learner is working on to the authentic, real world in which the task will be completed. Lave's (1988) research explored learning within traditional apprenticeships and that learning takes place in everyday activities. Characteristics of learning within traditional apprenticeships according to Lave (1988) are:

- specific methods for carrying out tasks;
- skills are instrumental for accomplishing real-world tasks;
- learning is embedded in social and functional contexts; and
- one can learn domain-specific methods through observation; coaching and practice (Collins & Kapur, 2014).

Brown, Collins and Duguid (1989) built their work on Lave's (1988) research. They coined the term "cognitive apprenticeship" and defined it as an expert teaching a novice new skills through real-world situations. Brown et al. (1989) identify the characteristics of cognitive apprenticeships, namely:

- an expert teaches complex processes to an apprentice, or someone less knowledgeable of the task;
- the focus is on cognitive skills, not physical skills, such as in a traditional apprenticeship;
- learners must make their thought processes visible to the expert;
- experts must show the usefulness of particular strategies, encouraging learners to practice them and increase the task's difficulty; and
- there is a focus on generalising knowledge so that it is applicable in diverse settings.

Collins and Kapur (2014) identify three important components of situated learning. The first is the rejection of the notion of the information-processing model of cognition. According to them, situated learning requires the connection between learning and context. Schema or mental models that are disconnected from the larger world do not support learning on their own. In situated learning, perception is interaction with the world instead of internal representations about the world.

The second component according to Collins and Kapur (2014) is that situated learning is embodied (physical and intellectual learning paired together), embedded (learning is mediated by physical and social environment) and extended (physical and social environment create cognitive systems).

The third component is the connection to constructivism, which describes learning as active creation of mental models. Constructivism claims that:

- schema must be actively built to help the learner to process new information;
- there is no passive internalisation of new information; and
- mental models are created through interaction with the environment, the world at large and the learner's social environment (Collins & Kapur, 2014).

Huang (2002) draws on the work of Dewey (1961) and Vygotsky (1962) which states that constructivism:

- promotes and requires active and real-life learning;
- scaffolds on prior learning;
- necessitates reasoning processes; and
- demands social interaction.

Clancey (1995) defines situated learning as the improvement of one's understanding, creativity and interpretation over the course of an activity. Clancey defines the elements of situated learning as follows:

> [I]n situated learning no importance is given to retention of **content**, it rather stresses reflective and higher order thinking where the results are used in solving problems faced in daily life and is thus more application based. **Context** provides a framework for the usage of the product or result at the right time, place and situation in the social psychological and material environment and creates a platform to examine the learning experiences. **Community** helps the learner to create, interpret, reflect and form meanings and provides opportunities to share experiences among learners and also to interact. **Participation** is where the interchange of ideas, problem solving and engaging of learners take place. This takes place in a social setting which includes reflecting, interpreting and negotiating among the participants of the community.

Situated learning can be linked to andragogy (adult learning) (Kapur, 2015). An adult learner, according to Kapur, is a mature person who is learning new skills and developing new attitudes after reaching a mature stage of intellectual, physical, and social growth. Adult learners, according to Kapur, are people who are generally recognised as adults and are participating in a structured learning process, whether through formal education, informal learning, or corporate-sponsored learning as a full-time or part-time learner. Our study highlights the principal as learner. Certain information and skills should be gained and/or acquired by the principal in order to ensure that the school is managed satisfactorily, in accordance with relevant legislation, regulations, and the PAM, as prescribed, and that the learners' education is promoted in a suitable manner and in accordance with authorised policies. Through a mentoring framework for novice principals, these learnings should be addressed to fulfil the required tasks as mentioned above.

Malcom Knowles proposed andragogy, also known as adult learning theory, in 1984 (see

Merriam, 2001). Knowles' perspectives on andragogy aimed to take advantage of adult learners' distinct learning styles and abilities. When teaching adult learners, teachers should accept the following five assumptions found by Knowles' theory of andragogy (Merriam, 2001):

- Adults have a more stable self-concept than adolescents because they are at a more advanced developmental level. As a result, they can direct their own education.
- Prior learning experience – unlike children, adults have a wide variety of experiences from which to draw while learning.
- Willingness to learn – many people have reached a stage in their lives that they understand the importance of education and are able to dedicate themselves to it.
- Motivations to study that are realistic – adults are searching for problem-solving approaches to learning. Many adults return to school for practical purposes, such as to pursue a new profession.
- Guided by internal motivation – while many children are motivated by external factors such as punishment or incentives for good grades, adults are more internally motivated.

According to Merriam (2001), based on these assumptions regarding adult learning, Knowles (1984) discusses four principles that could be considered by teachers when teaching adults, namely self-directedness, experiential learning, self-reflecting and problem-solving.



**Figure 1** The relationship between andragogy, situated learning and mentoring

**Methodology**
In this study we used a qualitative research design, which involved a case study design to explore the roles and responsibilities of principals and circuit managers. Given the interpretive role of the study and the nature of the research question, the case study approach was deemed the most suitable because it offers a structured way to collect data, analyse information and report the findings, allowing for a thorough understanding of a particular problem or situation. The case study method firstly provides a variety of participant perspectives, and secondly, it uses multiple data collection techniques. The aim of using this method was to be able to explore the diverse lived learning experiences of a cohort of principals at different points in their careers. According to Merriam (1998) a case study has four main characteristics: particularistic, descriptive, heuristic, and inductive. A **particularistic** study is one that focuses on a single event, process, or situation (in this case, the mentoring process of principals). The term "**descriptive**" refers to the phenomenon's rich and extensive set of details (in this case, the principals and circuit managers reflecting on their lived experiences and expectations of mentoring and mentoring processes). Each of these two characteristics (particularistic and descriptive) is **heuristic** because it advances an understanding of the phenomenon, while **inductive** refers to the form of reasoning used to determine generalisations or concepts that emerge from the data (see Merriam, 1998).

Where there is a need to gain an in-depth understanding of a problem, occurrence, or phenomenon of interest in its natural, real-life

context, the case study approach is especially useful (Crowe, Creswell, Robertson, Huby, Avery & Sheikh, 2011). With this study we examined the lived experiences of principal mentoring and the experiences of mentoring frameworks. The intrinsic case study was used as it is typically undertaken to learn about a unique phenomenon (Stake, 1995). In this study, the case study approach allowed us to define the uniqueness of the phenomenon, which distinguishes this phenomenon from all others.

A case study involves an up-close, in-depth and detailed examination of a subject (the case) as well as the related contextual conditions (Yin, 2009). A case study also offers a one-of-a-kind representation of real people in real situations, helping readers to interpret concepts more clearly than if they were merely confronted with abstract theories or principles (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011:289). The real-life events in this research, i.e. the principals' lived experiences, take the form of a concrete affair. Merriam (1998) describes a qualitative case study as the result of an intensive, holistic explanation and examination of a particular case, phenomenon or social issue. Mouton (2006:149) describes case studies as qualitative in nature with the aim to give an in-depth description of a small group (fewer than 50) of subjects or respondents. In this study, 10 principals and three circuit managers were the respondents. McMillan and Schumacher (2001) state that case studies investigate a case over time by using multiple data resources in a specific environment, whereas Yin (2009) regards a case study as a linear but interactive process.

Purposive sampling methods (see Punch, 2005:187) were used to select 10 principals of public primary and secondary schools and three circuit managers in one education district of the Western Cape Education Department. Purposive sampling, referred to as judgmental, selective, or subjective sampling, is a type of non-probability sampling where researchers choose participants for their surveys by using their own judgment (Punch, 2005). School size, socio-economic status and location were considered in the selection of research sites. To ensure anonymity and participant protection, the participants were given pseudonyms. The sample included principals of five secondary schools (with an average of 800 learners) and five primary schools, which included three large schools (with an average of 850 learners) and two small rural schools (also called multi-grade schools). A multi-grade school is a school in which there are some classes in which learners of more than one grade are taught by a single teacher (see DBE, RSA, 2015). Multi-grade teaching refers to a situation in which one teacher, who is often from a different culture and language background than the learners, teaches all or some of the subjects to learners who are in different grades or phases. Multi-grade teaching is most common in rural areas and on farms (see Joubert, 2009) (with an average of 100 learners). Purposive sampling (sampling in a deliberate way) (Punch, 2005:187) was used to identify the study participants to include principals and circuit managers representing different schools, genders and career stages (cf. Table 1). None of the principals and circuit managers in the study was part of any formal mentoring framework at any stage of their careers. Every participant was interviewed once, and the interviews were approximately 1½ hours long. The interviews were semi-structured and focused on the principals' experiences of their roles and responsibilities, conceptualising mentoring and conceptualising a mentoring framework as a developmental strategy. The individual interviews served as the main data source, while documents provided additional information. Interviews were also conducted with three circuit managers, the managers of the principals interviewed.

The data analysis procedure was broken down into several steps. Data preparation and logging were included in the initial step. The process of preparing the data included two steps: (1) reading through the transcripts created by an outside person against the voice recordings to ensure that the data were accurate, consistent, and relevant; and (2) carefully reviewing each interview script and inserting line numbers for later data organisation and analysis. The data that transpired at various times were logged in a database. The open coding stage of the analytical method was the third step in which initial tendencies were found and categorised into themes. The open coding procedure was used in each case in the next phase. With the assistance of cross-case coding and a continual comparative framework, it was possible to discover themes that were particular to each participant as well as categories that appeared again across instances. From the cross-case thematic analysis, an early data analysis process resulted in the creation of three initial sets of categories, namely: (1) understanding the concept of mentoring; (2) exposure to mentoring; and (3) whether there was a need for a mentoring strategy for professional development.

**Table 1** Principals' demographic data

| Participant | Age | School level | Gender | Years as principal or circuit manager | Years in education | Highest qualification |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| SP 1 | 52 | Primary | Male (M) | 7 | 29 | Advanced Certificate in Education |
| SP 2 | 55 | Secondary | M | 5 | 21 | Honours Degree |
| SP 3 | 47 | Secondary | Female (F) | 4 | 23 | Advanced Certificate in Education |
| SP 4 | 47 | Primary | M | 5 | 26 | Higher Diploma in Education |
| SP 5 | 50 | Primary | F | 1 | 24 | Master's Degree |
| SP 6 | 54 | Secondary | M | 15 | 29 | Advanced Certificate in Education |
| SP 7 | 53 | Primary | M | 10 | 30 | Advanced Certificate in Education |
| SP 8 | 49 | Primary | M | 3 | 24 | Four Year Bachelor's Degree |
| SP 9 | 56 | Secondary | M | 12 | 22 | Honours Degree |
| SP 10 | 45 | Secondary | F | 4 | 21 | Advanced Certificate in Education |
| Circuit Manager (CM) 1 | 55 | Primary and secondary | F | 3 | 32 | Master's Degree |
| CM 2 | 64 | Primary and secondary | F | 25 | 33 | Master's Degree |
| CM 3 | 49 | Primary and secondary | M | 2 | 27 | Advanced Certificate in Education |

To ensure trustworthiness (McGregor & Murnane, 2010), we sought to establish the credibility, transferability, and confirmability of the findings. For credibility, we ensured that the interpretation of the data was a true reflection of what was discovered (Merriam, 1998). The main ethical issues of the study revolved around the confidentiality of the data and the privacy of the participants in the research phase. Participants were given pseudonyms, and all school names were changed. In terms of ethical interaction, participants were asked to provide written informed consent and were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. The participants were also told that their interviews would be recorded. The individual interviews were transcribed, and the audio and typed transcripts were safely preserved to ensure the participants' privacy. The research took place over the course of a year. We aimed to achieve transferability by providing details about the schools and using the participants' responses to support the arguments. The data collected from the interviews and documents were triangulated to ensure the confirmability of the findings (Kaplan & Maxwell, 2005). This study was limited by the number of participants and the geographical location of the selected education district. Furthermore, only principals (school level) and circuit managers (district level) participated in the study. The participation of officials at provincial level might well have enriched the discussion of principal mentoring, and the limited range of sampling arguably restricted the generalisation of the findings.

**Findings**
Three themes emerged from analysis of the collected data: understanding the concept of mentoring; exposure to mentoring; and whether there was a need for a mentoring strategy for professional development. Pseudonyms (SP 1–SP 10) were used to protect the identity of the principals.

Theme 1: Understanding the Concept of Mentoring
All of the participants demonstrated a thorough understanding of the mentoring concept in their responses. SP 1 said: "[A] *more experience person helps and guides a less experience person.*"

SP 2 regarded mentoring as a process of the transfer of knowledge, expertise, experiences and skills from an experienced person to an inexperienced person, while SP 3 answered:

> [Mentoring] *involves a relationship between either two people or one person on the one hand and a group of people on the other with an intention of transferring knowledge and skills and encouraging growth and the necessary risk taking. Mentoring is a critical element in developing school leaders to become competent and to shape our view as leaders on how to manage the interrelated organisational systems and physical and financial resources of the school.*

Mentoring, according to SP 4, is a two-way partnership. He emphasised that it was not necessarily a relationship between an old and a young person but rather a relationship between an experienced person and a willing, inexperienced person. More importantly, he said, mentoring should be a reciprocal learning experience. SP 5 answered as follows: "[Mentoring] *is a common*

*understanding between two people, a relationship.*"

SP 6 agreed with SP 4 on the notion of reciprocity:

> [M]*entoring is when I share my experiences with you as mentee but on the other hand, I can also learn from the mentee. So, for me it is a reciprocal process where both parties in the relationship can learn, a two-way process.*

SP 7 said: "*I think that mentoring and coaching must go hand in hand.*"

SP 8 claimed that mentoring was about guiding and supporting novice teachers, while SP 9 replied: "[W]*hen I think about mentoring, I think about the relationship between a father and a son.*"

SP 10 responded: "[M]*entoring for me is when you have someone to talk to, who listens and guides me in times of need, sorrow and laughter.*"

### Theme 2: Exposure to Mentoring

To the question of whether they had received any kind of mentoring, all the participants responded that they had had no exposure to formal or structured mentoring before taking up the position of principal. They indicated that they had received informal mentoring from different people. SP 4 said that he had received mentoring from his principal predecessors, colleagues and circuit managers, but had never participated in a formal mentoring framework. SP 5 said: "[N]*ot on a formal base, I was assigned to one experience principal to be my mentor but it never happened. I normally seek advice from my previous principal and I've asked him to be my mentor.*"

SP 6 indicated that if and when he needed help, he contacted a few colleagues for assistance and guidance. SP 7 said that her previous circuit manager took her under her wing and helped her every step of the way: "[S]*he was mentoring me on a lot of different skills, like leadership, finances, human resource management, planning and organisational skills.*"

SP 9 indicated that, at the time, the department had no succession plan in place and that his previous principal introduced him to administration, finances and planning while he was a deputy principal. He added, "*there is no real mentoring taking place.*"

When asked whether informal mentoring had a good influence on their practices, all the participants responded positively. Eight of the participants responded as follows:

> [I]*t helped me with the daily routine of being a principal* (SP 1).
> [I]*t contributed to my growth as principal* (SP 2).
> [G]*aining self-confidence and become aware of my abilities and inabilities to carry out my work sufficiently* (SP 3).
> [I]*t taught me how to be a principal* (SP 4).
> *I benefitted hugely from their contributions and it is evident in my management of the school* (SP 5).
> *I am more skilful* (SP 7).

> [I]*t improved my relationship with my staff; it improved my soft skills* (SP 8).
> [I]*t helped me in the process of being a principal* (SP 9).

SP 6 said that mentoring helped him with administration, the interpretation of departmental guidelines and policies, and increased his confidence in managing the school. SP 10 indicated that the absence of mentoring had left her feeling lost, insecure, helpless and lonely, but that it had forced her to read more and to reach out to colleagues.

When asked about whether the lack of exposure to a formal mentoring framework had an impact on their competence to manage their roles and responsibilities as principals, most participants responded that the job was at first a considerable struggle. SP 4 said: "[I]*f principals are not exposed to a mentoring framework then they will struggle because they have no background to fall back on.*"

He reiterated that novice principals who do not have the experience of school management will soon find out that they lack certain competencies. SP 2 indicated that his confidence improved over the years in the principal position and now, after many mistakes and rectifying his mistakes on his own, he felt more competent in managing the school. He continued by saying: "*I worked hard on developing a set of abilities, for example communication, problem-solving, people management and decision-making.*"

SP 1 conceded that he had learnt by trial and error and through making mistakes. He said: "[I]*f I was expose to such a mentoring framework, I would not only feel competent but feel that I have mastered the art of being a principal.*"

Most of the participants described learning while being in the job, but felt that, had they been exposed to a mentoring framework, they would have been more competent to manage their schools from the start. SP 5 responded:

> [U]*nfortunately, as a principal, you have to learn whilst in the job and 80% of the time you would make mistakes and that is how I have learnt but as I said, it can be devastating when there is no-one to guide and inspire you.*

SP 7 replied that she felt very confident and competent as a principal but continued as follows, expressing frustration: "*I'm competent but sometimes I let negativity or negative people let me doubt myself.*"

### Theme 3: Is there a Need for Mentoring as a Professional Development Strategy?

On the question of whether mentoring as a professional development strategy can help improve school management, all of the participants answered in the affirmative. SP 3 indicated that mentoring would have given him the ability to think creatively and strategically: "[I]*t would also*

*give me the opportunity to learn how to manage people and manage relationships.*"

SP 6 said that mentoring would have taught him to reflect on his shortcomings and to work on them. He also said: "[T]*hrough a mentoring process, my ability to make decisions and manage certain situations* [might have been] *better ... take for example this COVID-19 pandemic, it requires very good management skills.*"

SP 2 expressed the following view: "*I would say that it would make 100% sense that mentoring will help me or any novice principal to be better managers of schools.*"

Creating an ethos and value system contributes to a professional culture among teachers at school. SP 5 mentioned that, as principal, one needs to see that one's teachers embrace the values of the school and live out the ethos of the school. SP 3 indicated that mentoring would systemically help him to identify the needs and strengths of his staff and develop them into a committed and competent workforce. SP 4 responded: "[A]*t many of our schools there are not such visions as a value system or that culture to make a difference. If mentorship can help me to let that happen at my school? It is possible.*"

SP 10 added: "[T]*he experience of a mentor can give me more guidance to confidently model a positive value system which my staff can embrace and that would add to a positive school ethos and professional culture amongst teachers.*"

To the question of what they thought should be the main elements of a mentoring framework for principals, the participants' responses differed and one could see that they were drawing on their own real-life experiences. SP 1, the principal of a multi-grade school, said support and keeping the context of the school in mind were important, and added:

> Give support. To advise me as a principal when I need the advice and to deliver the support that make sense to me. You need to see the problem in the context of the school because schools differ from school to school.

SP 2, also a principal of a multi-grade school agreed with SP 1 in that one had to consider the effect of the multi-grade setting on the work: "*In my circumstances, context. The context that the person is going to find himself in.*"

He was also of the view that leadership should definitely be an element in the mentoring framework. SP 3 said that the management of administrative systems and structures, physical and financial resources, organisational systems and human resources, as well as conflict resolution should be added as elements. SP 4 indicated that the management of people, the improvement of school leadership, and how to establish a positive school culture were important to him. According to SP 5, the important elements are: "[A] *mutual*

*understanding of the purpose of the mentor, the willingness from my side to be a mentee and the acknowledgement that mentoring is needed.*"

SP 6 agreed that leadership and the management of certain systems should be prioritised when developing a mentoring framework: "*I would say more about leadership and management methods of schools. I want to know what must I do to be more democratic or autocratic. Let's say leadership styles.*"

He also indicated that management of time, the curriculum, school finances and staff absenteeism should be among the main elements to be considered. SP 7 responded that the mentoring process should start with the orientation of the nine focus areas of whole-school evaluation (WSE) because WSE criteria (see Department of Education [DoE], RSA, 2001) are what principals need to know. She added: "[N]*obody actually is trained to be a principal; you just get like a session* [referring to induction] *for new principals but you are not trained to be a principal.*"

SP 8 agreed when she answered: "[N]*ovice principals need to be trained in the job description of a principal.*"

SP 9 concurred but added that a non-threatening environment should be created to maximise one's development together with one's mentor. SP 10 said that for her, the main elements of a mentoring framework were to have a mentor who is supportive, hardworking, a good listener and a comforter, someone who is reliable, creative and who has integrity.

Regarding the question about what the outcomes of a mentoring framework should be, the participants' responses were significant because they clearly demonstrated the participants' understanding of the nature of a mentoring framework and the need for it among novice principals. The participants identified leadership, improving management skills, and a support base for the mentee as important elements in a putative framework. SP 2 answered:

> Better leadership. Becoming a better principal and if you get to the point of a better principal you will surely have a better school community, which means better teachers, better parents, better children. Because at the end of the day, people get uses to a certain way of doing things.

SP 4 responded by saying: "*It should maximise my strengths, overcome some of my weaknesses, capitalise on the opportunities, strategize before the threats have an impact on me.*"

SP 5 replied: "[T]*he main outcome would be to ensure that there is a support base that would put the mentee at ease.*"

SP 1 claimed that it was important to set goals for oneself, and equally important that one should monitor one's progress and successes, while SP 1

and SP 6 were of the opinion that having an experienced mentor with whom one could build a solid trusting relationship would achieve the desired outcomes. SP 3 replied:

> *The main outcomes would be to ensure that there is a support base that would put the mentee at ease. Principals think that they are on top of it and no one can tell them anything. They make mistakes and it escalates to something else so you must know that you are allowed to make mistakes but it's important to correct those mistakes and learn from them.*

## Discussion
The findings indicate that principals are appointed without having any professional training or formal preparation for the principalship position. In South Africa, principals must have a minimum of a Grade 12 certificate, 4 years of tertiary education, and 7 years of teaching experience. This is the minimum requirement, also known as a Relative Education Qualification Value 14 ([REQ V14] DBE, RSA, 2016). The principals in the sample in this study were all appropriately qualified. According to Table 1,

- five of the participating principals held an Advanced Certificate in Education;
- one principal held a 4-year Higher Diploma in Education;
- two principals held an honours degree in education;
- one principal held a 4-year bachelor's degree; and
- one principal held a master's degree in education.

According to Mestry (2017), principals have a difficult time coping with several changes, partly because they are ill-prepared for their leadership roles or they simply lack the requisite skills, knowledge and values to lead and manage schools efficiently and effectively. He recommends that the professionalisation of principalship should be given serious consideration by reimagining the promotion criteria; the Integrated Quality Management System (IQMS) policy should be revised, agreed on by all stakeholders, and enforced in a serious manner; and that principals, School Management Team members and teachers should obtain further professional development from education district offices (Mestry, 2017).

The findings indicate that the participants understood mentoring in different ways but unanimously agreed that mentoring was some or other form of relationship or process and approach in which a mentee principal and a mentor principal collaborate in a constructive, learning-centred partnership with the goal of increasing leadership ability, professional growth, and support that is not unidirectional and acknowledges the mentee's agency (Hudson, 2012; Jones & Larwin, 2015; Pask & Joy, 2007; Starr, 2016). Mentoring is an important part of principal training programmes that aim to increase learner and school performance (SREB, 2007). Findings of a research study done in Ontario (Robinson, 2010) demonstrate that

mentoring programmes, which clearly articulate skills and competencies, lead to a heightened level of exchange between mentors and mentees, focussing on sharing the educational expertise associated with effective practice. The findings indicated that novice principals were exposed to various forms of informal mentoring activities, such as mentoring by former principals, colleagues, seniors and circuit managers. All the participants indicated that they had had no exposure to formal mentoring before accepting the position of principal, while acknowledging that they had received informal mentoring from various people. According to the data, the lack of exposure to formal mentoring affected – at least initially – their competence to perform their roles and responsibilities as principals. The participants indicated that this informal mentoring had the following positive influence on their practices:

- contributed to the growth as principal
- gained self-confidence as principal
- became aware of abilities and inabilities
- it had taught one participant to be a principal
- the contributions of informal mentoring are evident in the management of the school
- became more skilful
- improved the participant's relationship with staff
- improvement of soft skills, i.e., dealing with different types of relationships
- improved school administration and the interpretation of departmental guidelines and policies.

It is evident that the principals benefitted from informal mentoring practices and that the benefits of exposing principals to a formal structured mentoring framework could be even more. Learnings from the data and literature suggest that it is of critical importance that the mentoring framework is framed and guided by the principles of the situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991), andragogy (Dewey, 1961; Knowles, 1984; Kolb, 1984) and constructivism (Vygotsky, 1962), to accommodate the mentees and mentors.

Another finding indicates that principals made many mistakes during their first years of principalship and learnt from their mistakes. This finding concurs with Msila's (2012) conclusion that principals faced many challenges in South Africa and were learning through trial and error while on the job. This fact was summarised by one participant (SP 5) when he responded as follows:

> *Unfortunately, as a principal, you have to learn whilst in the job, and 80% of the time you would make mistakes and that is how I have learnt but as I said, it can be devastating when there is no-one to guide and inspire you.*

The findings show that the principals believed that mentoring as a professional development strategy would contribute to the improvement of the management of schools; the circuit managers agreed that a mentoring framework was needed for

principals. It appeared that a mentoring programme for principals should include an emphasis on management and leadership skills, people management, instructional leadership and context. This would empower principals to perform their roles and responsibilities as described in the SASA (RSA, 1996) with greater confidence. The findings also reveal that the outcomes of a mentoring framework should conduce to the development of the mentees' skills, competencies, knowledge and values in order to improve their praxes. The majority of participants identified improved leadership and management skills, and the provision of a support base for the mentee as significant outcomes.

The findings of this study suggest that principals can make a significant contribution to schools meeting educational goals and improving learner performance if they are adequately prepared and trained for their leadership role. This can be accomplished by exposing both aspiring and experienced principals to structured mentoring programmes.

**Conclusion**
With this study we found that there was a need for formal mentoring and that exposing principals to a formal mentoring framework as a developmental strategy could significantly contribute to schools meeting educational goals and improving academic achievement. The results of the study have shown that the need for principals' improved knowledge, skills and values in terms of school management and mentoring, and the belief that mentoring as a proficient growth plan is fundamental to improved quality of school management, were vital. This study provides readers with the knowledge they need to reinforce their own practice or develop formal mentoring activities as professional development strategies for principals.

Three important issues concerning changes in principals' professional development emerged from the study. Firstly, education authorities should acknowledge that the need for mentoring as a professional development strategy for school principals does exist. All participants agreed that principal mentoring was a definite need. Secondly, mentoring practice (i.e., a mentoring framework) as a developmental strategy for principals should be established and implemented. When appointed in the position of principal, novice principals generally reach out to previous principals under whom they had worked, colleagues and circuit managers to seek assistance and support. Thirdly, considering the developmental needs of principals, a mentoring framework for principals (which was developed by the corresponding author in his doctoral study), should be implemented as such a framework could successfully address principals' development needs and can be more sustainable

than *ad hoc* workshops. Considerable gaps exist between a realistic ideal and the actual management of a school. To achieve effective and efficient school management and leadership, the gap between what is currently taking place in school management and the ideal must be bridged. Making practical recommendations aids in isolating the problems that contribute to principals' effective and efficient management and leadership.

Recommendations are made for various stakeholders in the education sector, such as policymakers, national, provincial and district management, principal mentors, and principals. From the findings, the following recommendations are made:
- educational policymakers at national level should develop an amendment to the SASA to establish and implement a mentoring framework (as proposed above) for principals as a developmental strategy;
- the national education department should advocate, disseminate and mediate the above-mentioned recommended amendment to the South African School Act (SASA) at provincial, district and school level;
- the provincial education departments need to establish units at district level to manage, coordinate, implement and monitor the policy on principal mentoring in districts;
- the education districts, i.e., the district director, should be tasked to manage the implementation of the unit responsible for the mentoring framework in collaboration with the circuit managers who must coordinate the implementation of the mentoring framework; and
- SGBs and SMTs at schools should provide the district management with names of novice principals for the district to develop a database of novice principals in need of professional development.

The outcomes of a mentoring framework should conduce to the development of mentees' skills, competencies, knowledge and values in order to improve their praxes. The majority of participants identified improved leadership and management skills for the mentee as significant outcomes. Principals with improved leadership and management skills and the provision of a support base can make a significant contribution to schools meeting educational goals and improving learner performance. Education authorities should be encouraged to develop and implement mentoring practices and engage with principals who need to change their practices.

The lack of research on South African efforts to mentor school principals and the paucity of recent South African literature on the job description of school principals posed the biggest research challenge. To address these challenges we relied firstly on earlier literature on school management and school leadership in South Africa (see Botha, 2004; Mathibe, 2007; Mestry, 2017; Van Deventer & Kruger, 2003) and worldwide (see Glanz, 2006; Harvey, Holland & Cummins, 2013;

Martin et al., 2005; Marzano, Waters & McNulty, 2005; Thomson & Blackmore, 2006), secondly on international literature on mentoring of school principals (Hudson, 2012; Jones & Larwin, 2015; Pask & Joy, 2007; Starr, 2016) and thirdly on the sharing of the lived experiences of the participating principals and circuit managers. The positive social change that this study could contribute to education is a better understanding of the roles and responsibilities of principals and circuit managers, new understandings of the conversation on the mentoring of principals as a sustainable professional development strategy and the introduction of a mentoring framework for principals.

### Authors' Contributions
JD wrote the manuscript with the support of MC who also contributed to the conception and design of the study. JD conducted the interviews and provided the data for the manuscript. Both authors discussed the results and contributed to the final manuscript.

### Notes

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